



**A MARXIST ANALYSIS: CLASS STRUGGLE AND INDIVIDUAL
AWARENESS REFLECTED IN THE MAIN CHARACTER OF *HOLLER*
(2020) IN THE DEINDUSTRIALIZED AREA OF THE RUST BELT
IN JACKSON, OHIO**

A THESIS

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For S-1 Degree Majoring in American Studies in The English Department

Faculty of Humanities Diponegoro University

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PRONOUNCEMENT

This final project entitled “A Marxist Analysis: Class Struggle and Individual Awareness Reflected in The Main Character of *Holler* (2020) In the Deindustrialized Area of the Rust Belt in Jackson, Ohio” is my own work, and all sources, both quoted and referred to, have been stated correctly.

Semarang, 5 May 2026

Izzatun Amalia Nadhiroh

MOTTO AND DEDICATION

“If you fail, who cares? Just start over.”

— Bang Yedam

“Cause nothing lasts forever and nothing stays the same.”

— 5 Seconds of Summer

This thesis is dedicated to me, myself, and I

My parents

and those whom I love the most

APPROVAL

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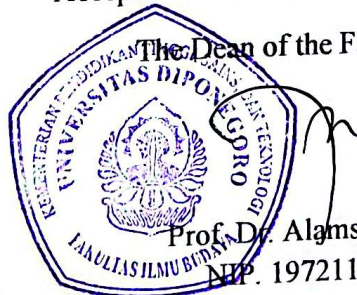
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Semarang, 5 May 2026

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ABSTRACT

The film *Holler* (2020), directed by Nicole Riegel, depicts the lives of the working class in Jackson, Ohio, a city impacted by deindustrialization in the United States' Rust Belt. The purpose of this study is to examine how the film portrays deindustrialization conditions through the lens of historical materialism, to describe the forms of class struggle experienced by the main characters, and to investigate the limitations of individual class consciousness in the context of post-industrial capitalism. This study uses a qualitative, literature-based method with a Marxist perspective, building on Karl Marx's theories of historical materialism and class struggle, as well as Georg Lukács' concept of levels of consciousness. Primary data is sourced from the film *Holler* (2020), while secondary data is obtained from relevant journals, books, and scholarly articles. The results indicate that deindustrialization in Ohio's Rust Belt is cinematically constructed as a material condition shaping the characters' lives, rather than merely a backdrop. Class struggle in this film manifests in three forms: unequal negotiation, accommodation of exploitation, and individual escape as a final act of resistance. The main character Ruth's consciousness remains at the individual level, while Blaze internalizes structural poverty as a personal failure. Both reflect how the material conditions of deindustrialization prevent the formation of the collective class consciousness necessary for structural change.

Keywords: deindustrialization, class struggle, historical materialism, class consciousness, Rust Belt, capitalism, American cinema

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

In the late 1870s, the Rust Belt was an area of the United States that began to develop as a center of manufacturing, coal production, and steelmaking, spanning several American states, including Ohio (Kropf, 2023). Ohio is a state in the Midwest and Northeast that became a center of American manufacturing. After that, in the 1980s, Feyrer (2007) notes that this industry experienced a rapid decline, leading to problems such as rising unemployment, increasing poverty, urban decay, and, ultimately, population decline. According to Vicari (2024), Ohio's economic and social system was still recovering in 2020. However, Ohio still faces challenges maintaining its economic growth rate, particularly as it transitions from a manufacturing to a modern service economy.

This study will use Marx's (1848) concepts, including historical materialism and class struggle. This is supported by Lukacs' (1923) theory of levels of consciousness, which resonates strongly with the social and economic conditions that shape society. Marx saw capitalism as always driven by capital accumulation and the search for surplus value. According to Nielsen (1985), Marxism views society through the framework of historical materialism, which holds that social structures and human consciousness are fundamentally conditioned by the means of material production.

This whole concept is depicted in *Holler* (2020), directed by Nicole Riegel and released on September 8, 2020, starring Jessica Barden, Becky Ann Baker, Pamela Adlon, etc. This teen life drama movie portrays conditions in Jackson, Ohio, an area generally known for its high poverty rate and dependence on the manufacturing sector, which has now collapsed. Jackson, part of the Rust Belt, has experienced economic decline, forcing the main character, Ruth Avery, to struggle to meet her needs and to feel confused about her future. The film depicts the bitter reality of Ruth, who often leaves school to work to survive. The situation becomes even more bitter when she is accepted into a university outside the city but cannot afford to attend, forcing Ruth and her brother, Blaze, to work at a dangerous junkyard to earn money. The young Ruth must struggle to earn money and choose between supporting her family and leaving to seek a better life at university.

By drawing on this research, the writer aims to examine how *Holler* (2020) portrays the Ohio Rust Belt as left-behind areas and reflect on the economic challenges faced by the lower class in the United States through a Marxist perspective. This study analyzes how the social and economic spaces depicted in the movie represent the impact of deindustrialization on the working class and how these conditions reflect structural inequalities in the American capitalist system. This analysis also shows that films serve not only as a medium of entertainment but also as a depiction that reveals the material consequences of post-industrial capitalism. This study reveals how economically disadvantaged spaces can shape identity and life choices, and how *Holler* (2020) highlights the structural inequalities faced by communities in Ohio's Rust Belt.

1.2 Research Questions

Based on the background of the study, the problems of this study will be divided into three primary analyses:

1. How does the film *Holler* (2020) represent the conditions of deindustrialization in Ohio's Rust Belt through the framework of historical materialism?
2. How is the working-class struggle depicted in *Holler* (2020), particularly through the experiences of the main characters?
3. How does *Holler* (2020) depict the main characters' individual awareness in relation to the limits of class consciousness?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the following:

1. To analyze how *Holler* (2020) represents the conditions of deindustrialization in Ohio's Rust Belt through the framework of historical materialism.
2. To examine the depiction of working-class struggle in *Holler* (2020) by illustrating the exploitation experienced by the main character through a Marxist analytical framework.
3. To investigate how this film portrays the individual awareness and the limits of class consciousness of the main character in *Holler* (2020).

1.4 Scope of the Study

In this study, the author will examine the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of the film *Holler* (2020) to answer three research questions. Intrinsically, the author analyzes the film's narrative structure, cinematography, setting, and characterization, particularly Ruth Avery as the protagonist and the symbolic representation of the Rust Belt environment. Extrinsically, the study focuses on three interrelated areas through a Marxist framework. First, the analysis examines how the film represents the material conditions of deindustrialization in Ohio's Rust Belt through historical materialism, which serves as the analysis's foundation. Second, the study analyzes the film's depiction of working-class struggle, examining how Ruth's experiences reflect the exploitation, economic despair, and lack of possible alternatives faced by the lower classes in post-industrial America. Third, the analysis explores Ruth's individual consciousness of the systemic capitalist exploitation of her circumstances. The author uses Marxist concepts of historical materialism, class struggle, and levels of consciousness to examine how the Rust Belt functions as a disadvantaged region due to the capitalist system, how Ruth's family represents working-class struggle, and how the film depicts the socio-economic realities of contemporary America. This study shows how the movie functions as a cultural medium to portray structural imbalance and as a social critique in contemporary American society.

1.5 Previous Studies

In analyzing the movie, the authors reviewed a few studies relevant to the research. Therefore, the main review will focus on the application of Marxist theory, particularly regarding class struggle and consciousness theory, across some films. The authors found six studies relevant to these two theories.

The first related study is by Felicia Jessica Kusen et al. (2012), entitled *Spectacle, Oppression, and Resistance: Class Struggle in Gladiator II through Marxist Criticism*. This paper analyzes the film *Gladiator II* through Marxist criticism, specifically class struggle theory, which explores structural inequality, labor exploitation, and the arrival of resistance in ancient Roman society. The primary theories employed are the commodification of labor, class consciousness, and historical materialism, as said by Karl Marx. This study revealed that the film serves as a cultural text for critiquing systemic oppression and reflects contemporary issues, including economic decline and corruption.

Based on *The Portrait of the Main Character's Struggle Against Capitalist Society in The Shawshank Redemption Movie by Frank Darabont* by Stephen Ali Barkah et al (2020). In this study, the author reveals how the main character's journey against the capitalist system is applied in prison. This prison presents problems related to class structures, including the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, the exploitation of prisoners, and the main character's resistance through his intelligence. The primary theories used are those of class struggle, class consciousness, and alienation, as outlined by Karl Marx, which serve as a critique of capitalism. This study found that the capitalist position, namely prison guards,

triggers oppression of prisoners who are exploited as a means of production with higher value.

Next, there's Shatabdi Mishra's (2022) study, *A Marxist Analysis of Class Consciousness in Bong Joon-ho's Parasite*. This research examines the inequality between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat within a Korean family. The authors examine how the working class attempts to challenge class domination by stealth and disguise. The Marxist theory employed in this study is Georg Lukács's theory of class consciousness. This study argues that the film is a sharp satire on inequality and the abuse of power in a society where the rich grow richer, and the poor grow poorer.

The fourth study, taken from Fajar Bahar, U., & Fajar Basri, U. (2024) work, *Class Struggle Representation by Phineas Taylor Barnum in the Greatest Showman Movie*, examines the character of Phineas Taylor Barnum, a lower-class worker who built his business from the ground up amidst the dominance of the established American elite in the 19th century. The class struggle theory employed is French and Raven's (1959) five bases of power, which are further divided into manifestations of class struggle. This film depicts Barnum's struggle against elite power and dependence on expert power. This struggle is viewed from economic, social, and political perspectives.

More is *Class Struggle and Systematic Exploitation: A Marxist Analysis of Social Inequality in "The Purge: Anarchy" (2014)* by Ravinda Syaiful Bustammi and Teguh Kasrabowo (2025). This work examines how class struggles and systematic exploitation function as social control in America, drawing on a

dystopian film theme. The concepts of class struggle and systematic exploitation are employed to support Marxist literary criticism in this film, which depicts character conflict, class divisions within the narrative, and reveals the mechanisms of institutional oppression. Systematic exploitation is illustrated through the power dynamics between social classes and government institutions that facilitate class-based violence.

The final study is *Social Class and Struggle in The Hunger Games (2012) Movie* by Fahmi Haidar Al Kahfi et al. (2025). This paper examines the representation of social class and class struggle in *The Hunger Games (2012)*, set in a country governed by a highly unequal social structure in which capitalist centers exploit poor districts. This research focuses on reflecting the real-world conflict between those in power and the oppressed. This study uses Marxist literary criticism, focusing on Karl Marx's theory of social class and class struggle. The researchers found that this film serves as a medium for criticizing the structure of capitalist society, which creates extreme inequality, and how this oppression continues to drive revolution.

The research conducted by this author is different from the six previous studies. Although this study shares the same subject as some of the studies mentioned above, the object of study is very different: Nicole Riegel's film *Holler (2020)*. While previous Marxist film studies predominantly emphasize overt class conflict and the emergence of class consciousness, limited attention has been given to cinematic representations of constrained agency and fragmented consciousness in post-industrial settings. *Holler (2020)* provides a distinct case by portraying class

struggle without collective resistance, thereby enabling an examination of the limits of class consciousness within contemporary capitalism. This study focuses on the journey of the main character, representing the lower class in a disadvantaged region of America, who must struggle to survive under unequal capitalism through a Marxist lens.

1.6 Method of the Study

1.6.1 Method of Research

This study will be conducted using a methodological approach based on a literature review. There are two sources of data: primary and secondary. Primary data is derived from the film *Holler* (2020) by Nicole Riegel. Secondary data is drawn from journals, books, and papers relevant to the topic.

1.6.2 Method of Approach

In analyzing the intrinsic elements of the film *Holler* (2020), the author employs M.H. Abrams' objective approach in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), which views a work of art as isolated from external factors. Consequently, the analysis treats the film as a self-contained entity and evaluates it according to criteria intrinsic to its existence. Furthermore, the author draws on the work of David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Jeff Smith in their book *Film Art: An Introduction* (2020) to analyze the cinematic elements that interact to create a film's meaning.

Moreover, in the context of extrinsic elements, the author will analyze class struggle and self-consciousness in the life of the main character in the film *Holler* (2020), set in a deindustrialized, underdeveloped region of America. The writer employs a Marxist approach to examine how the struggles of the working class and the emergence of individual consciousness are depicted. Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism will serve as the foundation for analyzing the background of the character's life in the former industrial region. Furthermore, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' theory of class struggle will be used to analyze the main character's working-class life in greater depth. Additionally, George Lukács' theory of self-consciousness will be applied to support the analysis of the main character's self-awareness. The author adopts a perspective that views these situations and conditions as the result of unequal capitalism in America. The author will use this approach to analyze the film *Holler* (2020) and how it represents the underdeveloped regions of modern America.

1.7 Organization of the Writing

CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

The first chapter of this thesis provides the background of the study, the research problem, the objectives of the study, previous studies, the scope of the study, the methods of the study, and the organization of the writing.

CHAPTER II INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The second chapter discusses the intrinsic theoretical framework. This chapter examines narrative elements and cinematography. In the narrative elements section, the author explains the film's theme, plot, characters, and setting. In the

cinematography section, the author provides a general definition and explains the imagery and sound used in the film.

CHAPTER III EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the author explains several expert theories that correlate with Marxism, forming the basis for analyzing this film. Furthermore, the researcher identifies extrinsic elements that shape the movie's overall story.

CHAPTER IV RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The fourth chapter of this research presents the results and discusses the main findings of the thesis.

CHAPTER V CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this thesis will discuss the conclusions drawn from the research.

CHAPTER II

INTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Narrative Elements

Abrams (1953:208) stated that a narrative is a story involving events, characters, and what those characters say and do, whether told in poetry or prose. In drama, the narrative unfolds through the direct presentation of the characters' actions and speech on stage.

2.1.1 Intrinsic Aspects

2.1.1.1 Theme

According to Abrams (2009:205), a theme is a general concept or doctrine that underlies a literary work and is presented to the reader, either implicitly or explicitly. The theme plays a crucial role in the overall story being told. It is closely related to the nuance or perspective implicit in the world (Wellek & Warren, 1943:234).

2.1.1.2 Plot

According to Abrams (2009:265), plot is the storyline in a dramatic or narrative work. A literary work is shaped by events and actions that are arranged and organized to achieve a specific artistic or emotional effect. On the other hand, plot can also be seen as a filmmaker's method of structuring and controlling how events are narrated rather than merely what happens (Wellek & Warren, 1943:224).

2.1.1.3 Character and Characterization

Characters are the people depicted in literary works, including drama and narrative (Abrams, 2009:42). Viewers interpret them as having certain moral, intellectual, and emotional qualities through their actions and dialogue. Meanwhile, characterization, according to Abrams (2009:43), is the way an author depicts the distinctive personalities of characters within a narrative. There are two main methods for this depiction: showing and telling. The showing method is used when the author reveals a character's personality through dialogue and actions without direct explanation. In contrast, with telling, the author directly explains the character's personality.

2.1.1.4 Settings

Setting generally refers to the part of the world in a literary work, specifically the environment that serves as the background, determining the characters' actions and the direction of the story. The setting in a narrative or dramatic work is the general location, historical time, or social conditions in which a scene takes place (Abrams, 2009:330). Holman (1973:491) supports this view, arguing that the setting is not merely about a place but also the conditions that surround and shape the characters.

2.1.1.4.1 Setting of Time

Abrams (2009:330) stated that the setting of time refers to the historical period in which a dramatic scene or narrative work takes place. Similarly, Holman

(1973:491) noted that the setting of time refers to a specific time or period when describing an action or event occurring within a story.

2.1.1.4.2 Setting of Places

The setting of place is the specific physical location where the scene takes place in a drama or narrative work (Abrams, 2009:330). This setting of place is the actual location, in terms of geography, topography, scenery, and physical setting, where the story unfolds (Holman, 1973:491).

2.1.1.4.3 Setting of Social Background

According to Abrams (2009:330), the social setting is defined by the social conditions depicted in a play or narrative work. This is supported by Holman (1973:491), who states that the social background is the characters' general environment, which includes their moral, mental, emotional, social, and religious conditions.

2.2 Cinematography

According to Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith (2020:159) in their book titled *FILM ART: An Introduction*, cinematography is described as writing in motion, that is, the process of recording by controlling how the cinematic world is visually captured and processed based on the filmmaker's decisions regarding framing and camera movement. Therefore, cinematography is a set of methods and techniques used to add meaning to a story through visuals (Brown, 2016:27).

2.2.1 Camera Distance

Camera distance is the framing of an image that allows us to define the impression of visual distance or proximity between the audience and the subject in a scene depicted in a film (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189). Camera distance includes close-up, extreme close-up, medium shot, medium-long shot, long shot, and extreme long shot.

2.2.1.1 Close-up Shot

This shot is typically used to highlight small details or specific elements of an object or character, depending on what is being shown. A close-up shot focuses attention on details of the human body, such as facial expressions and reactions, specific gestures, or small objects (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189).

2.2.1.2 Extreme Close-up Shot

An extreme close-up is a shot that typically uses a technique focusing only on the mouth and eyes when featuring a human subject, serving to intensify drama or provide strong visual symbolism. This shot focus on a portion of the face or an object, enhancing it to create intensity (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189).

2.2.1.3 Medium Shot

A medium shot is a close framing that clearly focuses on the subject, closer than a long shot. A medium shot usually frames the human body from the knees or waist up, allowing facial expressions to become more visible while still leaving

some background space (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189). As a result, the audience becomes more touched by the story.

2.2.1.4 Long Shot

A long shot is a framing technique used when a film purposes to present space, movement, and context comprehensively, focusing on the relationship between the subject and its environment. At this distance, figures are more dominant, but the background still controls the scene (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189). In long shots, figures are shown in full, from head to toe, and the attention is on the setting and action rather than on facial expressions.

2.2.1.5 Medium-Long Shot

This shot falls between the long and medium shots and is commonly used for its nice balance between the figure and the surroundings. Medium-long shots frame the human body from about the knees up, still maintaining spatial context, but getting close enough to make body gestures more recognizable (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189).

2.2.1.6 Extreme Long Shot

In an extreme long shot, the human figure is placed at a very long distance from the camera, making the background the most dominant visual element (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189). This shot focuses on space, landscape, or setting, minimizing the human figure and shifting the focus from individual expression to the environmental context.

The following are examples of the type of camera distance described by the camera distance technique mentioned above, without any subjectivity or additions from the writer.



2.2.1.1 Close-Up Shot



2.2.1.2 Extreme Close-Up Shot



2.2.1.3 Medium Shot



2.2.1.4 Medium-Long Shot



2.2.1.5 Long Shot



2.2.1.6 Extreme-Long Shot

(Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:189)

2.2.2 Sound

According to Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith (2020:265), sound in film is an active element that shapes how audiences perceive the film, rather than simply complementing the visuals. The combination of image and sound has a deeper impact on human consciousness. The images and sounds that appear guide the audience's interpretation toward a single moment that shapes their understanding of the film. In film, sound encompasses dialogue, music, and sound effects that are structured and arranged according to the context (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:271).

2.3 Mise-en-Scène

Generally, mise-en-scène is understood as what is shown in a film. In French, mise-en-scène means placing into a scene, including aspects of the film that overlap with the setting, lighting, costumes, and makeup in a performance (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:113). Filmmakers use mise-en-scène to achieve realism or even to create an imaginary world within a film. The components of mise-en-scène to be discussed are costume and makeup.

2.3.1 Costume

According to Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith (2020:119), costumes can play a causal role in a film's plot. Indirectly, costumes can improve characterization and explore changes in a character's attitude. Costumes are always harmonized with the setting so that the character stands out more than the setting, providing context for the character and their relationships.

2.3.2 Makeup

Makeup has evolved, offering new technologies for character visualization, as makeup artists can shape faces using makeup products, rubber compounds, and plasticine. Makeup is crucial in a scene, as it highlights an actor's expressive qualities (Bordwell, Thompson, & Smith, 2020:122). Although most makeup is still applied physically, technologies such as CGI (computer-generated imagery) can also be utilized.

CHAPTER III

EXTRINSIC THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Extrinsic elements, as defined by Wellek and Warren (1943:73) in their book *Theory of Literature*, are the relationships between literary works and non-literary factors outside the work itself, such as social background, history, author biography, ideology, and cultural conditions. These extrinsic aspects are supportive, not substitutive, to the analysis of the literary work itself. In short, extrinsic factors influence the creation and interpretation of the work beyond intrinsic analysis.

3.1 Socio-Economic Background of Ohio's Rust Belt in the 2000s – 2020s

The Rust Belt is the term used to describe the heavy industrial region spanning several states in the U.S. Midwest that flourished from the early 1870s to the early 1970s, establishing the U.S. as the world's dominant economic power (Kropf, 2023:220). Ohio, along with Michigan and Pennsylvania, is one of the core states of this region, with an economy heavily reliant on manufacturing, steel, and automotive industries (Faberman, 2002:3). When these industries experienced a major decline in the late 1970s through the 1980s, Ohio became one of the hardest-hit regions, with many counties losing more than 2 percent of total jobs (Feyrer, 2007:41). While economic cycles were driven more by job losses than by the creation of new jobs, with stagnant wage growth and a labor market dominated by established companies with low levels of innovation (Faberman, 2002:3).

By the 2000s, these structural conditions had become increasingly entrenched, giving rise to a distinct pattern of stagnation. Faberman (2002:5–7)

notes that low-growth metropolitan areas in Ohio, such as Cleveland, Youngstown-Warren, and Toledo, are characterized by low rates of both job creation and job destruction, with a dominance of small, stagnant, and old companies. The average age of firms in these regions reached approximately 42 quarters, older than in higher-growth regions, while wages also fell behind. Furthermore, Feyrer et al. (2007:43) identified the decline in the quality of urban facilities as the most enduring legacy of the Rust Belt's economic shock. The number of bars and restaurants per capita in affected areas fell by about 13 percent between 1977 and 1997, far exceeding the population decline rate. The quality-of-life rankings of cities like Cleveland consistently lag about 39 places behind the average for other American cities.

From the 2010s to the 2020s, the long-term impacts of deindustrialization became increasingly evident in the physical landscapes of Ohio's Rust Belt cities. Rhee (2025:2067) notes that despite various efforts such as urban restructuring, green space development, and pro-business policies, decline continues in many areas. Rhee's (2025:2079) spatial analysis of Cleveland reveals a distinctive urban structure. The city center is surrounded by large industrial zones, which in turn are encircled by residential zones increasingly fragmented by empty spaces left by demolished buildings. Rhee (2025:2080) argues that these empty spaces actually hold great potential for development into public spaces, given their strategic location between the city center and residential areas. Overall, Ohio's Rust Belt cities find themselves in an ambivalent position. While unemployment rates have returned to near the national average, in terms of population growth, facility quality,

and the coherence of the urban fabric, the gap with other regions has yet to show any meaningful recovery.

3.2 Marxist Concept of the American Capitalist System

According to Marx in *Capital, Vol. 1* (1867), capitalism organizes society through relations between those who control the means of production and those who sell their labor. The capitalist structure of production is the exploitation of workers, who must produce surplus value for the benefit of capitalists. In line with that, the *World Economic Forum* reported that the concentration of wealth in America is currently in the top 1%, with a large gap between worker productivity and wage increases. The instability of the system due to the widening gap also indicates a pattern of exploitation that is becoming more severe, as well as wage stagnation, which is causing the younger generation to be poorer than the previous generation. This reinforces the Marxist view that capitalism's contradictions are deepening over time.

3.2.1 Historical Materialism

Historical materialism is a framework for understanding how society, particularly its economy, changes over time. In their work, Marx and Engels (1845:6) introduced the concept of historical materialism in *The German Ideology*, defining it as the view that history and human consciousness are determined by material conditions and productive activity. The way humans produce the necessities of life determines social structure, human relationships, and their modes of thought. This is further explained in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique*

of *Political Economy* (1859). Marx (1859:4) writes that the mode of production of material life determines the social, political, and intellectual life processes. It is not human consciousness that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

In line with Marx, Nielsen (1985:49) explains that productive forces shape relations of production, and these relations of production, in turn, shape ideology, social consciousness, law, morality, and political institutions. Thus, the economic structure is the most fundamental determinant of social change. Both Marx and Nielsen view history as a material process driven by production and class relations, while ideas and ideologies shape ways of thinking, moral values, and even views of what is normal or just. However, people's ways of life and thinking change as the economic and social conditions in which they live change. Historical materialism, in its effort to understand societal dynamics, focuses on examining the distinctive social order of production within the society under study (Nielsen, 1985:49).

3.2.2 Base and Superstructure

In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1859:4) writes that the mode of production of material life determines social, political, and intellectual processes. The productive forces shape the relations of production. In turn, these relations shape law, ideology, social awareness, morality, and political institutions of the society (Nielsen, 1985:49).

The economic base is the material foundation that includes the forces of production, such as technology, labor, and resources. On the other hand, the relations of production refer to the relationship between capital owners and workers. Above this stands the superstructure, which encompasses all non-economic elements that arise from the economic base. The superstructure includes ideologies, educational institutions, laws, cultural values, and the way society thinks.

3.2.3 Class Struggle

According to Karl Marx, in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the history of society is the history of class struggle. Class struggle is part of human history, marked by class divisions in the economic system, namely the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Class struggle is also related to individuals' positions within the economic structure. According to Marx (1848:28), class position refers to the placement of individuals based on their ownership of the means of production, namely, whether they are capitalists or workers.

He further explains in his book, *Capital, Vol. 1* (1867), that the relationship between capital and labor results in exploitation. This exploitation occurs because capitalists obtain surplus value, the added value produced by labor that is not paid to workers as wages (Marx, 1867:158). This position then forms class condition, the material conditions individuals experience, such as working hours, wage levels, and daily living conditions, influenced by the capitalist production system (Marx, 1867:384).

Marx also explains that the development of capitalism creates various forms of class struggle through the relationship between capital and labor. One of these appears when technology and machines replace human labor in the production process, creating structural unemployment and increasing workers' dependence on capitalists (Marx, 1867:293). In this system, coercion against workers is no longer physical, as in slavery, but it is in an economic way. Workers are required to sell their labor to survive because they do not own the means of production. As a result, workers remain dependent on the capitalist system that regulates economic production and distribution (Marx, 1867:249).

As noted by So (1991:43), it encompasses economic, organizational, and political dimensions and does not always lead to revolution. It can result in reform through negotiated compromise or reproduce class alienation and fragmentation. Thus, class struggle is an eternal force that creates social change. The conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat can take two paths: revolution or reform. Revolution will occur when the proletariat succeeds in destroying the capitalist system, and reform will occur if the conflict results in compromise or gradual change in the social structure.

3.2.4 Levels of Consciousness

In his book *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács distinguishes two levels of consciousness: objective and psychological. Before discussing these two, it is important to understand the concept of reification as their foundation.

Reification is an inevitable and immediate condition for everyone living in a capitalist society (Lukács, 1923:197).

First, Immediate or Experiential Consciousness is consciousness that arises from direct observation without critical thought. Here, social reality appears as self-contained, unchangeable facts. In reality, however, this condition is a historical product that has been reified to the point that it feels natural. The social world of capitalism appears as a haphazard composition of isolated facts (Lukács, 1923: 94). All rules, norms, and conditions in capitalist society are actually man-made and born of a long historical process, not created directly from the start.

Second, Individual or Psychological Orientation is an empirical consciousness formed from a person's actual thoughts and feelings regarding their daily life. Lukács refers to these as psychologically explicable ideas that humans form about their life situations (Lukács, 1923: 51). This consciousness often does not align with the objective interests of their class because it is overly focused on narrow, personal experiences. Consequently, social conditions that should be changeable instead feel like personal fate.

These two levels of consciousness reinforce and lock each other in place, as reification continues to operate until the structure of reification sinks deeper, becomes more inevitable, and more definitive within human consciousness (Lukács, 1923: 93). Only by transcending both through historical mediation does social transformation become possible. Individuals feel they are faced with a life situation that seems to stand alone, rather than within a historical social structure.

On the other hand, Lukács also mentions distorted consciousness, an outcome of class situation. The barrier that transforms bourgeois class consciousness into objectively false consciousness is none other than the class situation itself (Lukács, 1923:54). This means that this distortion arises not merely from the individual mind, but from the structure of capitalist relations of production, which systematically prevents any class from viewing social totality from a perspective that extends beyond its immediate material position.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Deindustrialization as Material Condition in Jackson, Ohio

In *Holler* (2020), deindustrialization in the Rust Belt region of Ohio is not only presented as background but actively built through cinematographic elements, visual composition, and narrative structure as a condition that shapes the plot and the characters' experiences. Through its depiction of a declining industrial economy identified by the partial survival and following closure of a local factory, the film constructs a world in which economic transformation is inscribed directly in space, worklife, and daily life. Viewed through the lens of historical materialism, these elements show how changes in the economic base produce resulting changes in social relations, spatial organization, and individual consciousness.

This perspective is supported by Nielsen (see page 21), who argues that historical materialism functions not only as an economic theory but also as a framework for understanding how ideological and social formations are formed through material conditions. When applied to cinema, this implies that the film's visual and narrative choices shape the space in which material history is represented and interpreted.

Holler (2020) provides a narrative world based on the Rust Belt's deindustrialization as well as the continued socio-economic challenges associated with deindustrialization in this region. The deindustrialization of this region has resulted in a significant amount of change over time. Throughout the history of this

region, the way individuals have interacted with one another and how they view themselves have also changed.

These images below show an operational industrial facility, which is an instant noodles production facility located in the Rust Belt. Instant noodles are produced at this facility, which employs a large number of workers from nearby communities.



Picture 4.1 – 4.3

(Holler, 00:01:41 & 00:03:08-00:03:17)

Pictures 4.1–4.3 present three sequential visual representations of the factory that serves as the economic backbone of the Jackson community in the opening scene of *Holler* (2020). Picture 4.1 is taken at an extreme long-distance shot with the factory's smokestack in the distance under a gray, overcast sky. At this distance, the industrial structure dominates the frame and human figures are entirely absent, transferring all visual weight to the environment. The active smoke

rising from the smokestack acts as a visual indicator of the factory's continued operation. The absence of human voices or dialogue in this scene, accompanied only by the ambient sounds of the wind and the distant roar of factory machinery, underscores the impression of this industrial space operating without the involvement of individuals in the surrounding area. At this distance, the industrial structure dominates the frame, and there are no human figures at all. So visually, all the weight is on the environment. The smoke from the smokestack is active. It is a visual clue that the factory is still operational. In this scene, the absence of human voices or dialogue, only the ambient sounds of the wind and the distant roar of factory machinery, serves to supported the notion that this industrial space functions without the involvement of people in the area.

Picture 4.2 uses an extreme long shot of the factory's exterior, with a row of cars parked on the surrounding lot. The presence of vehicles signifies an active human activity center, with workers inside. The parking lot, filled with cars, visually communicates that the factory still supports the community's collective economic life and remains the primary source of livelihood for the community. The machine noise and industrial activity are audible from within the building, and it can also be seen that the factory still functions as the center of the community's economic life.

Picture 4.3 moves to the factory's interior, framed with a long shot. The brightly lit workspace, clean floors, uniformed workers, and moving industrial equipment collectively give a sense of structured, functional work. The presence of uniformed factory workers in the distance, and the single figure cut off by the frame,

support the impression that the individual is not the center of attention but rather part of the industrial system. The long shot here captures the full scale of the production floor, focusing on the organized and active nature of industrial work. The lighting is far warmer and more controlled compared to the exterior shots.

In its depiction of urban conditions, including the factory shot above, *Holler* (2020) consciously chose a cool, low-saturation cinematography, built deindustrialization as a condition that feels cold, stagnant, and hopeless. The film depicts the continuation of the industrial economic base through the extreme long shot of the factory smokestack still releasing smoke, indicating that industrial production still continues. The camera avoids dramatic effects, instead adopting an observational approach typical of documentaries without unnecessary camera effects.

The cinematographic choices in scenes using observational framing, a cool color palette, and the placement of workers in the industrial space are not only for aesthetic reasons but also representational strategies aligned with a historical materialist interpretation. The film constructs a representation where labor is defined by its relationship to the means of production by visually situating workers within the factory system rather than highlighting them as individuals. That is echoing Marx's argument that the economic base determines the position and consciousness of those within it.

This factory is the residents' only hope for employment and income. However, toward the end of the film, the factory is eventually shut down for no apparent reason.

ANNOUNCER: *“Any remaining employee must clear for immediately.”*
LINDA: *“You know me for how long now? Just let me in for 5 minutes.”*
BLAZE: *“Linda, what’s going on?”*
LINDA: *“They close this (the industry) down.”*

(Holler, 01:02:40 – 01:02:45)

In the dialogue above, the factory announcer states that the factory must be cleared immediately after the layoffs are announced. This left the building abandoned, increasing unemployment in the town, and making it a target for scrap metal seekers seeking iron and other metals. The film does not explicitly explain the factory’s closure, but its absence supports the structural characterization of deindustrialization, in which economic decisions control local workers. The announcement of the factory’s closure is delivered in a cold, impersonal voice, without dramatic background music. The absence of music supports the structural brutality of the decision. A life-changing moment for many is presented as if it were simply a routine administrative procedure.

The film’s refusal to provide a clear explanation for the factory closure cinematically reproduces this uncertainty. It places the audience alongside the workers in a state of structural ignorance. This ambiguity itself is characteristic of deindustrialization as a global capitalist process, in which economic decisions are made at the level of capital accumulation, far removed from the communities affected. These decisions by capital owners leave workers powerless and without explanation. This moment marks a visible crack in the economic foundations, which then reshapes the social conditions of society.

These abandoned factories and underutilized infrastructure indicate that an economic system once supported their operation. However, that system has collapsed over time. From a historical materialist perspective, such changes in economic conditions will impact social structures, policies, and people's ways of life. When cities centralize production elsewhere, the superstructure will adapt to the changing economic base. This adaptation will not occur immediately. It will have social impacts such as unemployment, inequality, and a decline in the quality of life for the community.

In the context of historical materialism, factory closures signal the decline of the industrial productive forces that once sustained society. This leads to new, more fragile work arrangements. Stable industrial jobs have disappeared, replaced by the informal economy, temporary work, and illegal activities such as the scrap metal collection carried out by Ruth and her brother. This transition from formal industrial employment to informal and precarious work reflects a broader pattern of social fragmentation. Workers are separated not only from stable sources of production but also from the collective social connections and meaningful relationships once formed in the structured world of factory work.

The film shows this in Ruth's work activities, which are isolated and fragmented, lacking the collective structure of factory work.



Picture 4.4

(Holler, 01:02:04)

In picture 4.4, Ruth is shown chopping wood for a fireplace, accompanied by the natural sound of an axe striking wood. However, what is revealed here is how Ruth lives in an industrial environment. The use of a medium shot allows the viewer to see Ruth's body in front of the post-industrial landscape, suggesting that her personal activities are never separate from the broader environmental conditions. When the industry has collapsed, and physical spaces remain, individuals must adapt out of necessity, as they cannot leave. This visual placement reinforces the idea that individual freedom is constrained by larger material structures.

Ruth, the main character, grows up in a post-industrial landscape that has lost its economic foundation. The film depicts Ruth as someone living in a city with empty factories, abandoned homes, and increasingly rare job vacancies. These conditions are cinematically reconstructed to give an argument about the relationship between economic structure and individual life, although rooted in the historical realities of the Rust Belt as described by Feyrer and Rhee (see page 21).

From a historical materialist perspective, this photograph not only documents Ruth's daily activities but also actively illustrates how the collapse of the industrial base transforms individual life experiences. The factory in the background serves as a concrete sign of the area's economic base, many of which have closed without a clear explanation. Ruth's job in the scrapyard, however, is now merely a means of meeting basic needs. This illustrates the restructuring of social relations and individual opportunities that Marx identified as a consequence of the shift in the mode of production.

In Marx's view, the modern capitalist world is caught in a tension between high productivity and wage stagnation. The fact that wealth in America is concentrated in the top 1%, while workers now receive stagnant wages, and that younger generations live in more difficult conditions, demonstrates the deepening contradictions of capitalism. Ohio's Rust Belt represents one local manifestation of these broader capitalist contradictions. Industrial collapse demonstrates how global capitalist relations can undermine local stability.

Ruth's life choices are closely tied to Jackson's material circumstances. Her desire to attend college is confronted by a social structure that no longer provides the mobility it once did when industrial jobs could support working-class families. Marx argued that human consciousness is a product of material conditions, not the other way around. The film depicts the relationship between the declining economic structure and the limited life opportunities for working-class youth. Ruth's lack of access to education is not a matter of personal choice, but of structural limitations

resulting from the collapse of the economic base. The film depicts not only the collapse of the economic foundation but also how this collapse reshapes the institutions, values, and ideological assumptions that once accompanied industrial success.

Furthermore, the film depicts a subtle ideological shift in society's belief in social mobility. Ruth's dream of college now seems nearly impossible in the world the film constructs. Cinematically, *Holler* (2020) depicts this not as an individual failure, but as the decline of an ideological promise no longer sustained by economic foundations. In terms of historical materialism, the film depicts deindustrialization not simply as a material transformation, but as a superstructural crisis. This superstructural crisis encompasses the collapse of the values, expectations, and social ideologies that industrial capitalism created and sustained.

In this sense, the lives of Ruth and other characters are directly shaped and limited by material conditions, as argued in historical materialism.



Picture 4.5 – 4.6

(*Holler*, 00:01:24 – 00:01:37)

The urban environment also reflects structural change. The two images above are from the film's opening scenes. Both feature cinematography that

emphasizes the unused urban landscape in winter. This is further enhanced by minimal lighting due to the sun being obscured by clouds, and a cool color palette that improves the cold and desolate atmosphere of the scenes. Pictures 4.5 and 4.6 use extreme-long shots in which urban space becomes the dominant element. The space serves not only as a backdrop but also suggests that the environment has lost its activity by minimizing human presence in these scenes. The dominance of empty space in these shots visually represents the absence of productive activity, making deindustrialization visible through spatial composition. There is no dialogue, no music, only the ambient sound of the wind accompanying the empty landscape. This silence is not a neutral absence of sound, but rather an intentional cinematic choice to communicate that these spaces have lost their vitality.

In terms of historical materialism, the film's representation of these empty spaces is significant precisely because it serves as an understandable record of economic transformation. The abandoned railway tracks and deserted streets are not neutral background elements. These films are cinematic representations of what remains when the economic basis that once governed social life has collapsed. The film depicts deindustrialization not as an abstract economic process, but as a concrete condition carved into the landscape and experienced by those who live it.

The film consistently depicts abandoned factories, empty houses, and disused infrastructure as part of a broader post-industrial landscape, as seen in the disused railway tracks in pictures 4.5 above. These spaces are not simply background elements, but cinematically constructed representations of the collapse

of material conditions. The film purposely frames and highlights these empty spaces. This directorial decision transforms deindustrialization from an abstract economic fact into a visually experienced reality. As Rhee explains (see page 21), Rust Belt cities now centralize services in certain areas, while others are left to decay. The film captures this atmosphere through the visuals of vast empty spaces, deserted streets, and abandoned buildings, as seen in pictures 4.5 and 4.6 above.

Within the framework of historical materialism, these spaces function as material manifestations of economic transformation rather than only visual decoration. They can be understood as material consequences of transformations in the economic base. The film depicts how economic decline and factory closures reshaped social life and employment patterns in the region. As the economic base changed, so did social relationships and daily life. Ruth's personal uncertainty reflects the broader economic unstableness experienced by Rust Belt communities, which are still struggling to find a new form after losing the material foundations that once built them.

Overall, *Holler* (2020) depicts the deindustrialization of Ohio's Rust Belt through cinematography as a narrative strategy that reflects the logic of historical materialism. Camera choices, a cool color palette, empty spaces, and diegetic sound collectively construct deindustrialization as a concrete material condition, not only as a backdrop. In line with Marx (see page 21), the factory closures and shift to an informal economy in this film are manifestations of changes in the economic base that directly shape social relations and individual opportunities. Ruth's journey is

not a personal struggle, but rather a structural product of the collapsing capitalist system.

4.2 Structural Class Relations and Forms of Struggle

According to Marx's view, class struggle is a historical conflict between the bourgeoisie, owners of the means of production, and the proletariat, workers exploited through the extraction of surplus value. This section argues that *Holler* (2020) represents the working-class struggle not as an open or revolutionary conflict, but as a daily survival practice shaped by the structural pressures of post-industrial capitalism.



Pictures 4.7 – 4.8

(*Holler*, 00:00:50 – 00:01:12)

This scene serves as the opening of the film *Holler* (2020). In picture 4.7, a long shot shows Ruth running while carrying a large bag of metal scrap through a narrow alley between two buildings. The film represents the working-class struggle from the outset through the visualization of a tight space, where Ruth's body is squeezed between two walls, signifying that her struggle always takes place within strict structural limits. The thick jacket and red hat Ruth wears indicate the harsh cold, emphasizing that this is not a choice of work but a necessity for survival. The

cool tone, low-saturation colors, and lighting reinforce the gloomy, cold winter atmosphere.

The second shot in picture 4.8 shifts to a long shot of an old red and white Ford pickup truck waiting at the end of the alley. There is no change in framing between these two images, directing the viewer's focus toward the activity and surroundings. There is no luxury here, only a worn-out old vehicle, which is the only asset that Ruth and Blaze possess. Visually, the film uses this old pickup truck to represent the limited means of production available to the working class, which only allow them to survive without opportunities for accumulation or economic mobility.

The film contextualizes these conditions as a direct consequence of deindustrialization, which limits Ruth's life choices and forces her into informal work. Ruth, a high school senior, is confused by her situation and is forced to take on an adult role at her age to support her family. This opening scene establishes Ruth's class position as part of a proletariat operating outside the law, not by moral choice. Ruth chooses this work because the economic system around her fails to provide a decent living.

4.2.1 Negotiation as Form of Struggle

In the film *Holler* (2020), class struggle first manifests itself through negotiation. As Marx noted (see page 23), workers who lack the means of production are structurally forced to sell their labor power on terms dictated by capitalists. In Jackson's post-industrial economy, the formal job market has

collapsed, and Hark's scrap yard is one of the few remaining sources of income. In this context, Ruth and Blaze are not negotiating in the sense of an exchange between equal partners. However, they make limited efforts to resist exploitation within a system that has already determined the outcome.



Picture 4.9 – 4.10

(Holler, 00:01:53-00:02:27)

Blaze and Ruth are forced to take on rough, precarious work selling this trash due to economic constraints and the absence of a family breadwinner. In picture 4.9, shot using a long-shot technique, a red truck is seen entering the scrapyard carrying a pile of black trash bags filled with used cans collected from a residential area. These bags of used cans are brought in to be sold to the scrapyard manager, Hark. This scene is set in winter and features a cloudy sky that is quite dark for daytime.

Continuing in picture 4.10, taken in a medium shot, we see Ruth wearing a red beanie and her brother Blaze wearing a black hat, both with hopeful expressions. They face the scrapyard owner and negotiate the price of the used cans they brought. However, since they aren't regular scrapyard workers in the area, the price Hark offers doesn't match the quantity they brought.

The inequality in this negotiation is evident when Blaze protests Hark's unilateral price reduction, even though they brought more cans, as shown in the dialogue below.

BLAZE: *"Thanks. That's it?"*

HARK: *"Yes, that's a new price."*

BLAZE: *"Fuck, man. We bought it more than last week, Hark."*

HARK: *"Okay, then you can take your can and go to another junkyard."*

(Holler, 00:01:53 – 00:02:01)

In this dialogue, Blaze represents the weaker and disadvantaged party. When Blaze protests with the line *"We brought more than last week, Hark,"* he represents the workers' attempt to negotiate a fair wage based on the amount of work done. Hark's response, from a position of dominance, shuts down the possibility of negotiation by offering a false alternative. There are only two options: accept the price or leave. This reveals that Hark, as the owner of the means of production, has the power to determine the value of his own labor.

In Marxist terms, this moment illustrates how surplus value is extracted from the workers. Ruth and Blaze carried more goods but received less pay, and the remainder was unilaterally taken by Hark as the capitalist. Ultimately, Ruth and Blaze accepted the price without resistance. This illustrates that negotiation under these structural conditions does not produce justice. Instead, it reinforces the existing power imbalance, with Hark holding the greater power.

HARK: *"So, how much are you looking to get from me?"*

RUTH: *"More than \$50."*

BLAZE: *"You know, I get a few construction jobs here and there, but no one hires help."*

(Holler, 00:20:00-00:20:08)

In this dialogue, Hark initiates wage negotiations as the party holding the capital and the terms of employment. Ruth and Blaze can only respond and not take the initiative. This scene represents the class struggle as an unequal negotiation, where access to work is entirely controlled by the capital owner. Within a Marxist framework, this is the moment when class relations become directly visible. As the owner of the means of production, Hark holds full control over who is allowed to work and what their wages will be. As Marx argues (see page 23), capitalists maintain control not only through economic power but also by positioning workers in conditions where no alternatives appear available. He places Ruth and Blaze in illegal work that requires no formal skills, while simultaneously instilling the belief that no other options are available to them.

Blaze indirectly explains why they are forced to rely on Hark by saying, *“You know, I get a few construction jobs here and there, but no one hires help.”* Construction is one of the few jobs remaining in Jackson following deindustrialization, but even that is insufficient and inconsistent. The phrase “no one hires help” is a bitter admission that the labor market in Jackson has shrunk so much that there is no room left for the working class to choose.

Ruth and Blaze’s economic desperation leaves them with no choice but to accept whatever Hark offers, who consciously exploits this situation through low wages and uncompensated work risks. Ultimately, the negotiation reveals a labor market system that has been destroyed by deindustrialization. Negotiation here can no longer function as a form of class struggle leading to justice.

4.2.2 Accommodation under Structural System

Holler (2020) depicts how, when negotiations fail to produce a fair outcome for both sides, the form of class struggle shifts toward compromise and accommodation under structural constraints. The development of capitalism creates structural unemployment, leaving people with no choice but to sell their labor under any circumstances (see page 23). This situation is portrayed in the story of Ruth and Blaze, who accommodate Hark's demands not because they agree with him, but because of Jackson's economic conditions during deindustrialization, where legal jobs have nearly vanished.



Picture 4.11 – 4.12

(Holler, 00:27:30 – 00:27:33)

The scenes in pictures 4.11 and 4.12 last about one minute and contain no dialogue. These scenes are shot in close-ups, featuring a steel-cutting machine and a side profile of Ruth's face with a serious expression. In this scene, only the sound of the steel-cutting machine is heard, creating a strong impression of a scrapyards. Ruth ultimately enters the world of work at the scrapyards by taking on dangerous labor, without any safety guarantees, and without any knowledge of the machinery or steel. In this scene, Ruth works at the recycling facility and struggles with the steel-cutting machine, equipped with no safety gear other than welding goggles.

This demonstrates that Ruth must take whatever work is available to earn a living and survive. She did not choose this job, but there is no other option for earning an income. This moment reflects what Marx identified as the economic compulsion embedded in capitalist labor relations (see page 23).

Ruth's attitude toward these dangerous conditions constitutes a form of class struggle to survive within a system that offers no way out. As So points out, class struggle does not always lead to empowerment or revolution, but can also manifest in everyday actions to survive under oppressive structural conditions (see page 23). In this context, Ruth must endure exploitation under an oppressive system because there is no alternative, working in the scrapyard without protection.

The most profound form of accommodation in this film is embodied in the character of Blaze. He has internalized the failure of this system as a personal failure, unlike Ruth, who accommodates these working conditions as a material necessity. This is evident in the dialogue below.

RUTH: *"Don't stay there with them."*

BLAZE: *"I'm not quitting. We've got enough deadbeats in this family."*

(Holler, 01:03:46 – 01:04:03)

Blaze adopts a capitalist framing that defines poverty as an individual's moral failure, rather than as a product of unjust relations of production. When he refers to his family as *deadbeats*, he fails to realize that the system has failed to provide a livelihood for him.

In the context of class struggle, this is the condition that So (see page 23) describes as working-class members turning on their fellow workers rather than identifying their common structural enemy. Blaze sees himself and his family as the problem and a burden. Although in reality, he, his family, and other working-class members are victims of a trapping system.

The contrast between Ruth's and Blaze's awareness of their respective situations is most sharply revealed in the following dialogue.

RUTH: *"I rather we're laid-off than die for scrap."*

BLAZE: *"We can't leave, Ruth, we don't have enough. Do you understand? If we leave now then all of this is for nothing."*

(Holler, 00:59:43 – 00:59:57)

This dialogue illustrates two different responses to the same exploitation. Unlike Ruth, who responds to exploitation by confronting it and leaving, Blaze chooses to stay, not because he is unaware of his dangerous and unfair working conditions, but because he sees no available alternatives. This contrasts with Ruth, who responds to exploitation by confronting and leaving. The dialogue *"We can't leave, Ruth, we don't have enough,"* can be seen as a reflection of how workers lack access to other economic options, and they are forced to continue selling their labor under exploitative conditions. In this system, coercion against workers is already through the economic system, rather than traditional methods like physical force. Blaze's dependence on Hark's wages for survival leaves him unfree. Hark does not need to force Blaze to accept his ideology because Jackson's economic structure already does so. This makes Blaze's experience evidence that exploitation

is experienced not only by those who resist but also by those forced to remain silent and endure the system.

So (see page 23) states that class struggle does not always lead to empowerment or revolution. In this film, the class struggle depicted in Ruth's story ultimately leads to fragmentation. Individuals are forced to make difficult choices because the collective conditions conducive to resistance are absent. Ruth and Blaze are the victims of a system whose freedom is severely limited by the economic realities they face. The form of struggle will remain individual, even though Ruth chooses to break free from this pattern.

4.2.3 Individual Exit as Final Act of Struggle

Since negotiations and accommodation proved incapable of changing the conditions of exploitation, the final form of class struggle available to Ruth was individual exit. Ruth chose to leave Jackson, leaving behind the life and struggles she had previously faced. However, Ruth's departure was the only form of resistance available to her. It was not a victory she achieved, but rather an individual escape that would not change the system, because Ruth did not organize a group of workers. The first instance of this exit is seen in the film when Ruth bravely confronts Hark in a scene toward the end of the film.

HARK: *"You stay in this town because you're scared. Scared to call, scared to leave."*

RUTH: *"You stay here because you're weak."*

(Holler, 00:59:08 – 00:59:14)

In this scene, Ruth confronts Hark as she realizes her life is on the line at the scrapyard following the death of a crew member who was shot. Ruth's verbal confrontation with Hark represents the pinnacle of individual resistance available within Jackson's structural conditions. When Ruth says, "*You stay here because you're weak,*" for a moment, she reverses the power dynamics that have been defined throughout the film. However, this resistance remains isolated and individualistic. No other workers stand by her side, not because they are unaware of the exploitation, but because their economic dependence on Hark's wages structurally prevents collective action. Therefore, resistance can occur without collective solidarity, ultimately resulting in Ruth's personal escape.

Another pressure Ruth must face is also depicted in the domestic context, such as the issue of housing rent, as evidenced in the following pictures.



Picture 4.13 – 4.14

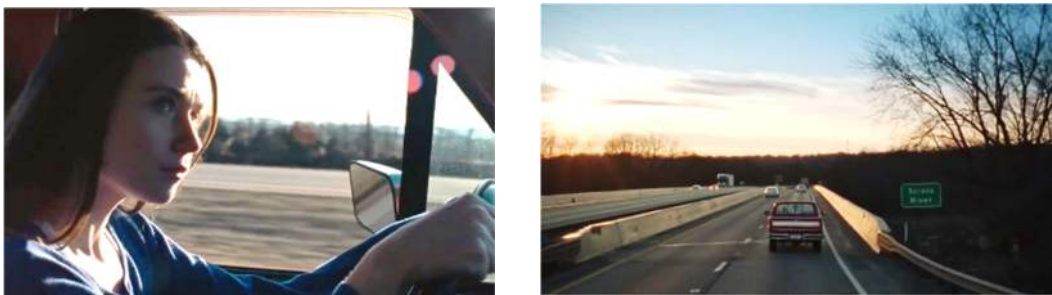
(Holler, 00:06:29 & 00:21:13)

These two shots were taken at different times in the film but are shown side by side to highlight the same thing: the relentless economic pressure. In picture 4.13, Ruth stands in a medium shot in front of her front door, with an eviction notice posted on it. Ruth's expression appears flat from the side profile of her face,

showing no surprise, as if she is already accustomed to it. The lighting is natural and flat, without high contrast, reinforcing the realist style. Moving on to picture 4.14, which jumps to the middle of the film with a close-up shot showing a growing stack of eviction notices plastered on the same door. The letters look crumpled, piled haphazardly, and some are already beginning to tear at the edges.

The film depicts the mounting economic pressure through the visual repetition of eviction notices, which serve as a marker that the working-class struggle is ongoing and worsening over time. This reflects what Marx identified as the commodification of basic needs under capitalism (see page 22), where even housing becomes unaffordable for those at the bottom of the class structure. These conditions pile up and drive Ruth to want to escape the system that is harming her.

Her arguments with Hark and the mounting economic burden Ruth bears are among the reasons she leaves Jackson. Her resolute decision to leave her brother and her life in the city is demonstrated in the following scene.



Picture 4.15 – 4.16

(Holler, 01:24:13 – 01:24:30)

In this scene, Ruth drives away from Jackson in her red Blaze truck, passing through the twilight on a fairly wide, empty road. In picture 4.15, her face is serious

as she drives the truck expressionlessly, and not a single word is spoken. The change in her outfit from the red jacket and beanie she always wore to a blue T-shirt with her hair down also signifies that she has left her old identity in Jackson behind. Ruth is leaving to seek a change in her life, breaking free from the struggle she has been waging alone.

Ruth's physical departure is an act of breaking free from exploitative conditions. In other words, this is Ruth's most fundamental form of resistance. Ruth refuses to continue being part of the system that exploits her. When Ruth leaves alone, she takes a personal final exit at the individual level while leaving the class structure intact. As So states (see page 23), the outcome for Ruth is individual fragmentation. This can be interpreted as a product of the structural conditions created in deindustrialized areas. These areas have lost their labor unions, lack shared workspaces, and lack a collective framework. Ultimately, Ruth escapes the system in Jackson, but the system itself will not change.

Thus, *Holler* (2020) describes class struggle not as a collective movement that changes structures, but rather as a series of individual responses: negotiation, accommodation, and ultimately exit. However, none of these produce structural change because the material conditions in Jackson have destroyed the foundation necessary for the formation of collective class consciousness.

4.3 Individual Awareness and the Limits of Class Consciousness

This section states that *Holler* (2020) depicts the protagonist's individual consciousness through direct experience of exploitation. This experience together

reveals her limitations due to the absence of the collective conditions necessary for the formation of class consciousness. This depiction is constructed through dialogue, character conflict, and visual elements that focus on the individual's isolation within the post-industrial economic structure.



Picture 4.17 – 4.18

(Holler, 00:59:08 – 00:59:14)

It is revealed that one of Hark's crew members was shot by another crew member and did not survive. In this scene, Ruth demands that the incident be reported to the police and investigated fairly. In picture 4.17, the film represents Ruth's critical awareness through her actions, which directly confront Hark and question why the death was not legally investigated. Cinematically, tight framing isolates Ruth from her surroundings, emphasizing that her awareness is individual and not supported by the collective.

HARK: "Look, Ruth, like you wanna get the police evolve around here? If it's all you wanna do, you can kiss your paycheck bye."

RUTH: "I thought you and the police really tied."

(Holler, 00:58:24 – 00:58:30)

Based on the dialogue above, this threat actually reveals that Hark controls Ruth not only through physical authority at the scrapyards but also through economic dependence.

Next, in picture 4.18, Hark, feeling powerful, angrily responds to Ruth because he knows this scrapyards business is illegal. The film builds tension through close-up shots in low light. Visually, this underscores the unequal power dynamic while highlighting the limitations of Ruth's position as a worker. The cigarette smoke filling the room further reinforces the sense of coldness and insecurity. The tension peaks as the two confront each other verbally in the dialogue below, which supports the evidence from pictures 4.17 and 4.18 above.

HARK: *"You stay in this town because you're scared. Scared to call, scared to leave."*

RUTH: *"You stay here because you're weak."*

(Holler, 00:59:08 – 00:59:14)

This scene ends with Hark's anger, with no one coming to Ruth's defense. No one agrees with her because Hark's scrapyards is where they earn the money needed to survive, and they are afraid of being fired for opposing their boss. The film illustrates that Ruth's consciousness remains limited to the individual level, due to the lack of support or solidarity from other workers in that environment. Ruth's consciousness is empirically accurate in an individual sense, but it has not yet become a historical force as long as it remains isolated from collective class practice. Therefore, Ruth is not an unconscious figure. On the contrary, her

consciousness is individual in nature and thus cannot yet become a historical force for change.

This confrontation scene ends with Hark kicking Ruth out of his house, as evidenced by the following.

RUTH: *“You stay here because you’re weak.”*

HARK: *“Get out! Get the fuck out! Get off from my property.”*

(Holler, 00:59:25 – 00:59:30)

After Hark angrily scolded her and kicked her out, Ruth immediately gathered her belongings and left the house without further complaint.



Pictures 4.19 – 4.20

(Holler, 00:59:30 & 01:01:18)

Picture 4.19 shows Ruth from behind as she opens the door to retrieve her belongings from Hark’s house, where she lived as a live-in worker. A medium shot shows Ruth’s body filling the frame, while the door and wall create vertical lines that define the space around her. Her red hat and dirty work jacket contrast sharply with the cold gray wall.

In contrast, picture 4.20 uses a more open composition with a medium-long shot. In this picture, Ruth stands outdoors, wearing a heavy jacket and a red hat,

carrying two large, heavy-looking bags. This suggests that she is not only leaving temporarily but is actually leaving the situation permanently. The open space around her conveys a sense of spatial freedom with its spacious, quiet composition, a contrast to the cramped composition of the previous image. There is no dramatic sound as she leaves the junkyard crew; only silence accompanies her.

Ruth bravely confronts and leaves Hark, who had previously scolded her for her awareness of the lack of safety in the junkyard. This scene is notable because it reveals Ruth's perception of the capitalist mechanisms that trap her in her environment. Ruth views Hark as the primary exploiter, even though he is also part of the broader economic system that shapes this labor relationship. According to Lukács (see page 23), this recognition is a form of direct awareness, that is, empirical perception. Ruth's awareness arises from direct observation of social phenomena, without developing into deeper structural reflection.

Ruth is aware of what she's up against, including her boss, her paycheck, and her limited future there in Jackson, but this awareness remains at the surface. She does not see the larger issue: the capitalists who created these conditions as a structural problem. She sees the offenders, but not the system that makes them not avoidable. From a survival perspective, she accepts illegal work because she needs money to pay for college and rent. Ultimately, she leaves the town on her own because it seems like the most realistic way for her to change her life.

All of these actions are forced by the material pressures she feels, not by an understanding of her class position. Here, Lukács's notion of individual orientation

becomes relevant because it is formed by the psychological constructions individuals make about their own life situations, particularly the area in which Ruth lives. Economic conditions appear to her as an unescapable reality rather than a historically made structure.

Ultimately, Ruth's awareness remains limited. She clearly understands her suffering, but her understanding remains restricted to personal experience, rather than developing into a collective class consciousness. Thus, no matter how sharp Ruth's awareness, she remains stuck on the surface of social reality, rather than understanding the historical structures within.

Furthermore, the absence of class consciousness in *Holler* (2020) is not a narrative mistake or a personal failure on Ruth's part. In Marxist terms, this is the most structurally evident depiction of post-industrial Ohio. Jackson is a city where collective class identity has been historically deconstructed. There is a lack of labor unions, organized labor movements, or shared political consciousness among the workers depicted in this film.

Even the scrapyards are a fragmented space marked by fierce, even criminal, competition among crews to collect copper from abandoned factories.

RUTH: "*Someone's holder here.*"

(Another crew entered the old manufacturing)

PERSON 1: "*What is that?*"

PERSON 2: "*Another crew is here. Check the other side.*"

(*Holler*, 00:55:31 – 00:56:38)

In the conversation above, Ruth, who was working to collect scrap metal at the abandoned factory, realized another crew was inside. Shortly afterward, the other crew appeared armed with firearms and fired at Hark's crew without knowing whom they were shooting at.

Competition to find value in economic ruins contributes to turning these places into abandoned areas. Competition at this scrapyards is structural. Under Hark's informal and exploitative arrangements, scrapyards workers compete with rival groups rather than recognizing their shared exploitation, meaning their working conditions actively hinder the formation of collective consciousness. Ruth's failure to achieve class consciousness is not a personal failure, but a product of Jackson's structural conditions of no unions, no shared workspaces, and no labor organizations capable of transforming individual grievances into collective demands. Deindustrialization left behind isolation and competition among crews instead.

If Ruth represents the upper limit of what individual consciousness can achieve under these structural conditions, Blaze represents the lower limit. Ruth is still able to sense the trap and envision a way out, while Blaze embodies the internalization of structural conditions as personal failure, as in the dialogue below.

RUTH: *"It can be you."*

BLAZE: *"I'm not leaving. If you wanna go, you can go. I'm not leaving. Cause there's nothing else out there for me."*

(Holler, 00:59:59 – 01:00:30)

Blaze says, “*‘Cause there’s nothing else out there for me*”, which is proof that Blaze views himself as someone unworthy of a better life. He fails to see that the limited choices in his life are a product of deindustrialization and capitalism’s inability to provide social mobility for the working class. To Blaze, the system doesn’t exist; instead, he believes he is simply not good enough. Furthermore, he views his family as poor because too many people have failed to achieve economic well-being, as evidenced by the dialogue below.

RUTH: “*Don’t stay there with them.*”

BLAZE: “*I’m not quitting. We’ve got enough deadbeats in this family.*”

(*Holler*, 01:03:46 – 01:04:03)

When Blaze calls his family *deadbeats*, he unconsciously adopts capitalism’s ideological narrative that blames individuals for poverty that is, actually, structural in nature. The term is a moral label, and its use indicates that Blaze has internalized a perspective that actually contributes to his oppression. Lukács (see page 24) describes this state as the most distorted form of consciousness. Here, the system no longer needs to lie to itself from the outside because the individual has accepted it from the inside themselves. This causes the individual to lose the ability to differentiate between objective conditions and their subjective perceptions.

Unlike Ruth, Blaze does not resist the existing system. In Blaze’s mind, the system appears not as a structure but as a personal reality. He is trapped by the boundaries he has created for himself, making him the most noticeable contrast in the spectrum of individual consciousness in the film.

The contrast between Ruth and Blaze serves as the film's primary narrative strategy to depict the spectrum of individual consciousness. From limited critical awareness (Ruth) to complete internalization of ideology (Blaze), both of which ultimately fail to develop into a collective class consciousness.

RUTH: *"I rather we're laid-off than die for scrap."*

BLAZE: *"We can't leave, Ruth, we don't have enough. Do you understand? If we leave now then all of this is for nothing."*

(Holler, 00:59:43 – 00:59:57)

The dialogue above shows that Ruth realizes she would rather save her life than continue working in a dangerous environment at the scrapyard. Where her life is threatened by the absence of safety guarantees at the scrapyard. Aligns with what Lukács (see page 24) identifies as consciousness in its earliest and most limited form, as what Ruth owns in the dialogue example above. This form of consciousness is objectively valid because it accurately understands exploitation and its mechanisms, but it has not yet been collectively recognized by the class to which she belongs. She understands that she is exploited by working in the scrapyard. She knows that her working relationship with Hark is disadvantageous to her, and that the city offers no future for her. Her consciousness is not mistaken, but this individual consciousness alone is not enough to form class consciousness.

Ruth's departure at the end of the film is the clearest evidence that her consciousness never developed into a class consciousness. She leaves Jackson alone without organizing the workers. She leaves without building awareness and solidarity with fellow crew members facing similar dangers and low wages. Ruth's

consciousness never reaches its full potential. She remains stuck at the individual level, realistic in her perceptions, limited in her scope, and unable to achieve the historical consequences of class consciousness.



Picture 4.21 – 4.22

(Holler, 01:24:13 – 01:24:30)

In picture 4.21, a close-up of Ruth's face is used while she is driving. Ruth's expression is flat and serious, staring at the road. Her eyes stare straight ahead without a single word out of her mouth. The interior lighting of the car is natural and dim, creating soft shadows on her face that prove the emotional burden she is carrying. Ruth's appearance in this scene is different from her appearance throughout the film. She no longer wears the heavy jacket and red hat that were part of her wardrobe while working at the scrapyards. Instead, at this moment, she wears a simple blue T-shirt. This change in costume symbolically signifies Ruth's loss of her identity as a worker and the Ruth who lives in Jackson.

This is followed by picture 4.22, which shows a long shot of Ruth's red Blaze truck driving down a relatively quiet road. The scene is shot as dusk approaches, with the sky wide open. In this scene, a sign on the side of the road reads "Scioto River." The twilight lighting in this closing scene often signifies both

endings and uncertainty, a classic cinematic technique. The film chooses neither a hopeful morning nor a pitch-black night, but rather an ambiguous twilight. Ruth is heading toward something unknown, leaving behind something that has clearly been destroyed.

In this scene, the song choice of *Scott Street* by Phoebe Bridgers for the closing sequence is more than just background music. The song's emotional tone closely mirrors Ruth's state of mind when she left Jackson. The song's meaning, which expresses alienation from her environment, clarifies Ruth's intention to leave Jackson because she felt unsupported by her community. Ruth leaves with a quiet sadness, not a sense of success. Here, the music does not explicitly explain Ruth's feelings, but rather creates an ambiguous emotional space between hope and loss, between leaving and not being truly free.

Holler (2020) does not depict a collective rebellion, but rather the structural reality of class consciousness under the ideological and material constraints identified by Lukács. The film does not portray individual failure, but rather the failure of historical conditions that do not provide the material basis for individual consciousness to transform into collective power. Ruth leaves, Blaze stays, and Jackson remains the same.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Based on *Holler's* (2020) analysis above, this film addresses the three research questions regarding the conditions of deindustrialization in Ohio's Rust Belt, the nature of class struggle, and the limits of the main character's class consciousness. First, the film portrays deindustrialization as a concrete physical condition, not merely a backdrop, through shots of the urban landscape featuring empty spaces and abandoned industrial buildings in extreme long-shots, a cool color palette, and ambient sounds from the environment. The loss of stable industrial jobs, shared workspaces, and labor organizations resulting from factory closures creates a structural condition in which consciousness is limited, and class struggle becomes fragmented. Furthermore, *Holler* (2020) depicts working-class struggle as a series of limited individual responses aimed at escaping structural exploitation. This manifestation consists of Ruth and Blaze's attempts to negotiate against the terms imposed by Hark, the capitalist authority, yet they fail, resulting in injustice in both working conditions and wages. Subsequently, accommodation emerges in Ruth, who must accept hazardous working conditions without safety guarantees due to material necessity. Ultimately, Ruth chooses to leave Jackson as the final act of this struggle, representing the last and most individual form of resistance available to her. Furthermore, the collapse of the economic base, particularly depicted in this film, produces varying levels of consciousness, depending on how individuals internalize these structural conditions. Ruth demonstrates a form of consciousness that Lukács calls immediate awareness,

whereas Blaze internalizes structural poverty as a personal failure, a distorted consciousness. This condition is intertwined with the earlier explanation of historical materialism regarding the limitations of consciousness, which are constrained by the structural conditions in the Rust Belt. In the end, Ruth leaves alone, Blaze stays behind, and Jackson remains unchanged.

Ultimately, this film does not end with absolute victory or defeat but serves as a cinematic argument asserting that without the material conditions for collective consciousness, individual consciousness, no matter how sharp, is unable to become a historical force for change. Deindustrialization in the Rust Belt is not a local phenomenon in and of itself, but rather part of a global pattern of capitalism that shifts production to regions with lower labor costs. This leaves working-class communities without alternatives and deepens the contradictions of capitalism that Marx had predicted. Nicole Riegel, the director, grew up in Jackson, Ohio. Thus, she consciously uses the medium of film to give a voice to communities that have long been invisible in the grand narrative of America. In other words, this film is a form of cultural critique of American capitalism and its failure toward the working class in post-industrial regions. The film also challenges the ideology of the American Dream, which promises social mobility to anyone willing to work hard, because Ruth has worked hard, but the system has not given her a chance.

In this way, *Holler* (2020) functions not only as a cinematic work but as a social critique that uses the medium of film to document and challenge the structural realities experienced by working-class communities in post-industrial America.

Future research could expand this analysis by combining the Marxist framework with other theories to produce a more comprehensive interpretation of working-class representations in post-industrial American films, or by conducting a comparative study between *Holler* (2020) and similar films to map how American cinema more broadly represents the impact of deindustrialization on working-class communities.

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